



Cote d'Ivoire

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

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The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

Interreligious tension among Catholics, Muslims, followers of traditional indigenous beliefs, and evangelical Protestants continued with each group feeling disadvantaged vis-à-vis the others. However, religious leaders made concerted efforts to encourage interfaith dialogue. The ongoing political crisis caused some divisions along ethnic and religious lines.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. government officials engaged religious leaders to advance religious tolerance and reconciliation.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 124,500 square miles and a population of 18 million. An estimated 35 to 40 percent of the population is Christian and an equal number is Muslim. An estimated 25 percent practices indigenous religious beliefs. Many persons who are nominally Christian or Muslim also practice some aspects of indigenous religious beliefs, particularly as economic and political conditions worsened after the failed 2002 coup.

Traditionally, the north is associated with Islam and the south with Christianity, although both regions included many indigenous religious practitioners. However, the political crisis displaced over 700,000 people internally, many to a different region. Political and religious affiliation tend to follow ethnic and socioeconomic lines.

Christian groups include Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, Assemblies of God, Southern Baptists, Coptics, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

Other religious groups include Buddhists, Baha'is, the International Association for the Conscience of Krishna, and Bossonists, who follow a traditional practice of the Akan ethnic group.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. Although there is no state religion, the country's first two presidents were Catholic. For this reason, the Government historically favored Christianity, particularly Catholicism.

The Government observes Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, Lailat al-Qadr, Maulid al-Nabi, Easter Monday, Ascension Day, Pentecost Monday, All Saints' Day, and Christmas as national holidays.

Muslims are underrepresented in official positions and the civil service. Muslims are also underrepresented in state-supported media outlets, particularly radio and television stations.

The law requires all religious groups to register with the Government. Groups must submit an application to the Ministry of Interior's Department of Faith-Based Organizations. This application must include the group's bylaws, names of the founding members and board members, date of founding (or the date on which the founder received the revelation of his or her calling), and general assembly minutes. The Ministry of Interior investigates the organization to ensure that the group has no politically subversive members or purpose. No religious group complained of arbitrary registration procedures or problems with gaining government recognition during the reporting period.

The Department of Faith-Based Organizations used its funds for construction on religious sites and travel for religious pilgrimages.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

Many northern Muslims continued to feel discriminated against when applying for certificates of nationality and passports. However, the Government issued replacement birth certificates during the reporting period under a political agreement to address this concern.

Some Muslim organizations viewed the Government's organizational requirements for Hajj trips to Saudi Arabia as unnecessary and unwarranted interference in religious affairs. For example, the Government required a minimum of 100 pilgrims per group, whereas the Saudi Government only requires 50 pilgrims per group. The Government also required any group seeking to organize Hajj pilgrims to have been in existence for 3 to 4 years.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Improvements in Respect for Religious Freedom

The Government continued to promote interfaith understanding and responded to the needs of various religious constituencies. The President met with Muslim and Christian leaders as well as traditional chiefs to listen to their concerns. In November 2007 the President gave \$1.2 million (500 million FCFA) to Muslim leaders to help finish construction of the Islamic community center in the Plateau district of Abidjan.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

Some societal discrimination against Muslims and followers of traditional indigenous religions continued during the reporting period. Other groups, particularly evangelical Christians, complained of discrimination and sectarian hostility.

Religious leaders continued to organize public interfaith activities during the reporting period. In early 2008 Christian and Muslim student religious associations held conferences addressing moral degradation in schools. On November 15, 2007, the National Islamic Council organized interfaith prayers at a mosque in Abidjan in which Catholic, evangelical Christian and Protestant leaders, as well as government officials, participated.

The Forum of Religious Confessions promoted dialogue, understanding, and improved relationships among religious leaders and groups. The Collective of Religious Confessions for National Reconciliation and Peace, created at a later date than the Forum with government and American Cultural Center support, included all religious groups in the country, including various evangelical churches that had previously refused to join the Forum. Discussions continued on combining the two organizations.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Embassy officials regularly met with a broad range of civil society groups that work on religious tolerance issues.

The Embassy sent three religious leaders, one Catholic priest and two Muslim leaders, to the United State to participate in International Visitors Program (IVP) seminars addressing religious freedom and tolerance.

On March 12, 2008, the Embassy hosted an interfaith roundtable on women's role in religious life. The roundtable included women of Catholic, Muslim, and Protestant Christian faith, journalists, and members of women's religious youth groups.

On January 31, 2008, the Embassy hosted a conference on the role of religion in society. The panelists included two Catholic priests, two Muslims leaders, and one evangelical Christian minister who had participated in past IVP trips on the role of religion in civil society. Panelists exchanged views with other religious leaders, academics, journalists, and representatives of women's and youth religious organizations.

On January 23, 2008, the Embassy organized a religious outreach program at a mosque in Abidjan with the National Islamic Council to promote democracy, mutual understanding, and religious freedom.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)

